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Dec. '80.

Alone in the Arctic Wilderness.

By A. J. Stone.

Illustrated from photographs by the Author.

An Experience with Renegade Indians in the Northwest Territory—Boat-Building under Difficulties—Down the Liard in a Canvas Boat.

EDITOR'S NOTE.—The results of Mr. Stone's Arctic explorations have already been exploited through the bulletins of the American Museum of Natural History, in whose interest he was working. The incidents here narrated took place in the vicinity of Fort Simpson, just before the author's researches along the Mackenzie River.

DURING the month of December, 1897, I transported my entire outfit, consisting of provisions and utensils necessary for my future expeditions, to a point on the Liard River just below Hell Gate Cañon. Here I stored them in a rude cache built of heavy logs. Below Hell Gate the Liard is navigable; and my object in selecting the place was to be in a position, as soon as the river should be clear of ice in the spring, to take my provisions down stream by boat without loss of time. The cache was completed in December. The river, I knew, would not be navigable before April. The intervening time I determined to employ in exploring the surrounding country. So, leaving two men to guard the cache during my absence, I set out at once with a sledge of provisions, and succeeded in reaching a point on a tributary of the Liard about a hundred miles from Hell Gate, where news reached me which made it necessary to retrace my steps in all possible haste. A band of murderous renegade Indians was reported encamped in the immediate vicinity of the cache where my outfit was stored.

During my absence in the late winter and early spring I gathered many facts concerning the history of these murderous renegades. They were, as I found, a thieving and vicious lot, composed of outlaws from various tribes, driven from among their own people for the crimes and deeds of violence they had committed there. The most brutal murders were laid to their charge—murders of feeble or troublesome members of their own tribe—

children, women, and cripples. Occasionally, too, a strong man would be suddenly despatched to the hunting grounds by an offended neighbor. In such cases nothing was ever said. There was no retribution. I only heard of one case in which the opposite of this held true. The blood-stained hands of one fellow had accomplished such slaughter among them that he had been forced to flee even from their vengeance, and, at the time of my visit, he had been living alone in hiding



AN ARCTIC HUNTER'S CACHE.

The cache of Arctic hunters is a rude shelter of logs built for the protection of their supplies and goods, and the Indians of the region being very superstitious regarding these structures, they are rarely meddled with.

for a period of three years. These Indians, called the "Hell Gates," always seek winter quarters away from the river, back in the mountains, but return to the stream early in the spring. When, therefore, news reached me late in March that a party of from seventy-five to a hundred of these dangerous customers had assembled on the river near my cache below Hell Gate, I naturally felt anxious for the safety of my outfit, and lost no time in hurrying to the spot.

When I arrived there, after a long and difficult return journey over the snow, I found the place, much to my astonishment, quite deserted. The men I had left in charge of the cache were nowhere to be found. My first thought was that they had been murdered, but, failing to find any trace of their bodies, and, on closer inspection, discovering that the contents of the cache had not been disturbed, I was forced to the conclusion that they had deserted of their own accord. Even Powder, an Indian medicine-man I brought back with me from the north, deserted me the morning after our arrival, so I was left alone, with only my faithful sledge-dog, Zilla, for a companion, to cope as best I might with my unwelcome and murderous neighbors. What became of Powder and the guards I never knew, nor did I much

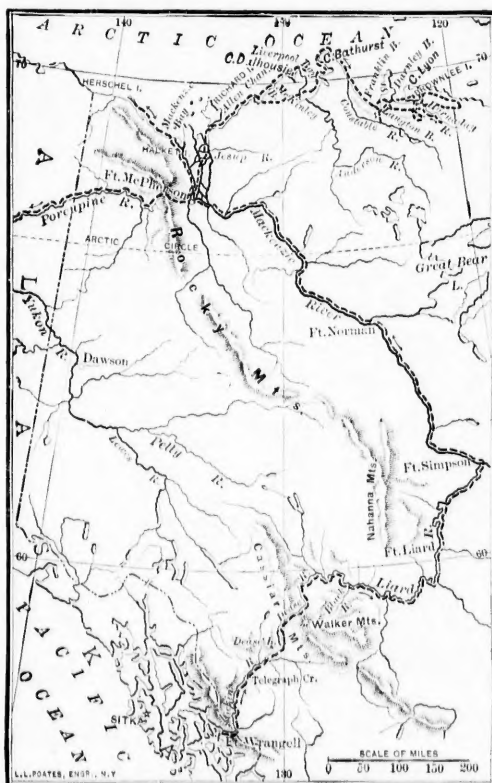
care. In the dangerous position in which I was placed it was sufficient compensation to know that the outfit and provisions, upon which the success of future expeditions depended, were still intact.

The reason why the cache had not been disturbed was soon made clear. The Indians had not yet become aware of its existence.

Upon my arrival, however, several of the renegades made bold to approach me, and, discovering the cache, to ask what it contained. I put them off as well as I could with evasive answers, which I could readily see were far from leaving upon them the desired impression. I was resolved, however, in case of attack, to risk my life, if necessary, in the protection of the cache and its contents.

On the supposition that in all probability there would be more danger by night than by day, my first idea was to arrange a safe and suitable place to

sleep. Around the cache I had previously cleared a considerable space by cutting down trees for firewood. In the centre of this clearing two large spruce trees were still standing. Under these I determined to spread my blankets. In this way, by abandoning my tent altogether and sleeping in the open air, I should be enabled, I thought, by the light of a good fire, to command an uninterrupted view



MAP OF NORTHWESTERN BRITISH AMERICA.

Showing Mr. Stone's route and his geographical discoveries.



LIARD RIVER INDIANS.

of from seventy-five to a hundred yards on all sides.

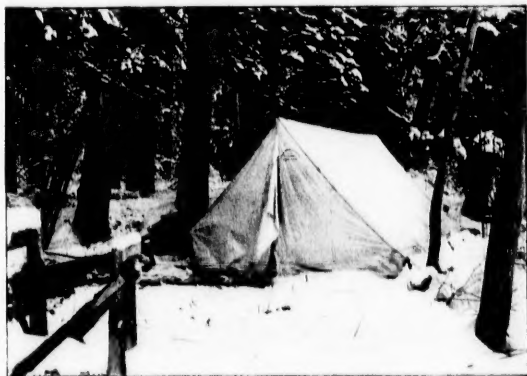
It seemed advisable, also, on account of having brought with me on the sledge sufficient provisions for present needs, to leave the cache unopened until I had done my best to rid myself of the Indians. Had it been necessary, I could have rolled the heavy logs from the top of my hoard without assistance, but I could not have put them back again unaided, and as the Indians are somewhat timid about breaking into a cache, I knew that it would be much easier to keep them from pilfering before I opened it than afterward.

Even so, my situation was a trying one. Here I was with an outfit weighing a ton, to be taken down the river, without a boat, and, worse still, with no one to help me build one. The three men I had counted on for this emergency had deserted. Nor was there assistance within available distance. The nearest settlement to which I might appeal was a Hudson Bay trading post on the Liard, one hundred and fifty miles down stream, which I could not reach without sacrificing my cache to the Indians. I resolved, therefore, to remain, and trust to diplomacy and my knowledge of local customs and superstitions to bring me safely out of my predicament. Among other

things, I decided carefully to avoid any quarrel with my neighbors, to be firm, never to show fear, to refuse absolutely all demands, and always to be ready for self-defence. I slept under the two big trees in the clearing as I had planned, certain that no one could approach unseen. As an added precaution, however, I always tied Zilla on one side of my bed, and placed three loaded rifles with extra ammunition on the other.

For many days I kept my lonesome watch. I was beginning to feel worn out and very nervous, and had about concluded that, after all, I had over-estimated the possible dangers from the renegades. The snow had by this time quite disappeared from the little clearing, but was about eight inches deep in the timber. During the day it grew soft, but at night a hard crust formed over the top.

One night, having taken my usual precautions, I was awakened by a low growl from Zilla, and presently, just behind me, I heard footsteps in the snow at the edge of the timber. Raising myself on my blankets, at the same time keeping perfectly still, I listened. I could hear the steps plainly, a regular tramp, tramp, tramp, as though the prowler were moving slowly and cautiously along the edge of the clearing. The event I had been so long awaiting had at last come. Now that the rascals were surrounding me, preparing to seize upon my life and belongings, I was conscious that my heart was



THE AUTHOR'S CAMP IN THE FOREST.



OVERLOOKING THE LIARD FROM THE SUMMIT OF NAHANNA ROCK, FOUR THOUSAND FEET HIGH.

beating more rapidly, and felt my teeth gritting together. Carefully and noiselessly I lifted and cocked one of my rifles. I did not feel especially nervous or excited. It was high time to conclude this tiresome business, and if I thought of any one's death it was that of a Hell Gate Indian.

Tramp, tramp, tramp continued the steps.

Evidently my visitor was circling the clearing and trying to locate me by the dim light of the midnight stars. My fire was low, and gave little light.

The steps continued around the camp until they reached a point directly in front of me, where one of the trees of my camp stood between me and my unseen foe. Here was my chance. By crawling up close behind the tree I should gain a decided advantage. I feared an ambush, however, and realizing that my slightest movement might reveal my position, I laid low.

The footsteps ceased, and I could not discover whether the disturber of my rest was crawling toward me or standing still

and listening. The suspense became unbearable. I called. If there was to be any shooting I wanted to get through with it.

No response. I called again. Not a sound. I was at a loss what to make of the situation. I still thought it advisable, however, to remain concealed, so there I sat on my blankets, waiting, until I was chilled through. At last, thoroughly disgusted, I lay down again and tried to persuade myself that I had been dreaming and had better go to sleep. But very soon I heard the steps again, and sat up rifle in hand.

This time I was *not* dreaming. Some one was coming directly toward me with the evident intention of keeping the tree between us. The steps drew nearer and nearer. I lifted my rifle, secretly rejoicing that there would soon be a dead Indian in the neighborhood. I held my breath, and just as I expected to see my enemy emerge, a big white dog stepped from behind the tree. Although my finger was on the trigger I did not shoot. I just laid down my rifle and crawled back into my blankets.

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I never shall forget my feeling of mingled relief and disappointment. I rather wanted to complete the interesting little tragedy promised, but, on the whole, my relief was great. An Indian dog had scented some moose meat hanging in the tree above me, and had manoeuvred to reach it undiscovered. Its step was most deceptive, and if I had not seen the animal I should always have believed that I had been visited by an Indian.

The Indians continued to harass me daily, and became more and more troublesome. To give them anything would, I knew, be like giving a tiger a taste of blood. Their pleas grew insistent, but I stubbornly refused them. The reader may wonder how I conversed with them. I knew a number of their words, beside something of Chinook, of which they also knew a little. Most helpful of all was my skill in the sign language, so necessary to travellers in this region, and only to be acquired by contact with the natives. One big fellow became so intolerably insulting one afternoon that I had to drive him out of camp with a club. This quarrel, which I had felt sure would bring trouble upon me, really put an end to my worries, for the Indians, like the cowards they really were, concluded that they could secure provisions elsewhere with less danger; and the very next day they began moving away to their hunting grounds. I was very glad to see them go. Besides their greedy longing for the contents of my cache, there was another reason why their presence endangered me. In one of their camps was a man nearly dead with consumption, and if he died while I was there, I knew that they would be sure to attribute his death to the white man. Undoubtedly either my life or my *ictas* (possessions) would have been required to make good the loss. I had seen the man and knew that he was near his end, and I should not have known how to avert the superstitious wrath of his friends. When all the Indians had departed except the consumptive and his family, I visited these with rice and fruit. A white man, I told them, always has a good heart, but he always does what he

chooses with his own *ictas*. Finding that they had plenty of moose meat, I bought some for Zilla.

When, after the torment I had gone through, the Indian cut-throats finally went away and left me in peace, I felt immensely happy and relieved. My courage seemed renewed, and I did not doubt that as I had proved my ability to withstand such a band, so I could also model and construct a boat single-handed, although I had never watched the building of one, and was scantily provided with suitable materials. I went down the river for several miles, and discovered that for about three miles the water was likely to be dangerous; but that one mile farther on there was an ideal spot for a camp, with all kinds of timber in abundance, and one magnificent grove of straight, slender young spruce, just what I was likely to need.

I set about moving at once, loading three hundred and fifty pounds on the sled at a time, which Zilla could easily draw over the four miles of smooth ice which lay between my camp and the spruce grove. By the time I had unloaded a cargo and hauled it up the bank, I was tired enough to get on the sled myself, and let Zilla carry me back after another load.

Thus, in three days, I moved my entire outfit, pitched my tent, and put everything in order.

My new camp was among the big timber on the river bank, and about twenty feet above the level of the ice. There was an abrupt bend in the river just above, and another about half a mile below. A belt of thick timber stretched behind me; and across the river, the country rose steeply from the water's edge. Thus I was completely shut in on all sides.

During my troubles with the Indians I had found time to plan my boat. I had heard that a man alone could cut boards from trees by placing a log in position, standing on the top of it with a hold on the upper end of the saw, and tying a bag of flour to the lower end. This feat seemed too difficult for me, so I hung my



MR. STONE STRIPPING BARK FROM A SPRUCE TREE WITH WHICH TO COVER THE RIBS OF HIS BOAT.

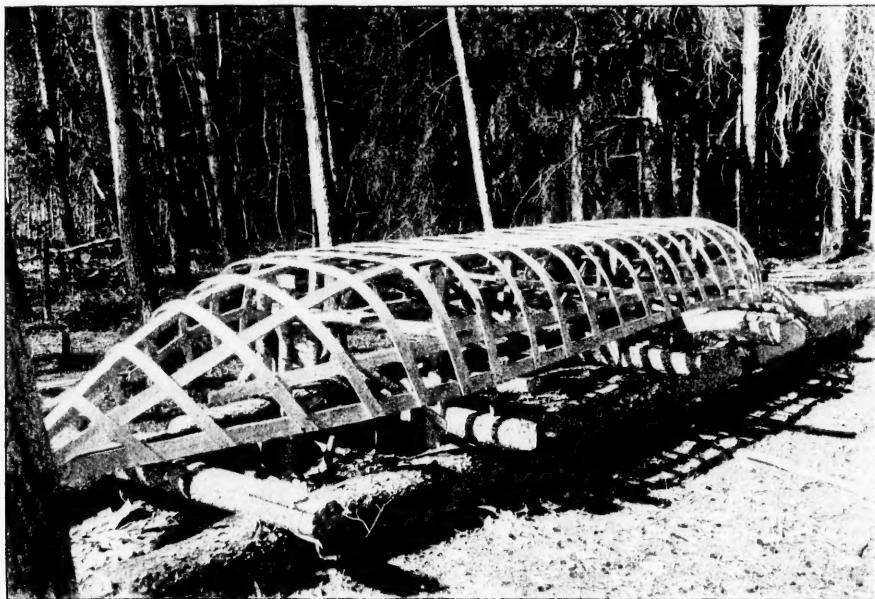
whip-saw in a tree and decided to try some more practical expedient. I considered skin boats and birch-bark canoes, but I had no skins for the one, and I could not make a bark canoe large enough or strong enough for the load. The only other kinds which occurred to me were as boats and log rafts. Evidently I must choose one of these for transport.

First of all, then, I decided on the size of boat necessary to carry my goods. I figured that it must be twenty-four feet long, five and a half feet in the beam, and twenty-one inches deep amidships. I brought out from my stores all the canvas I had, and decided, after careful examination, that by judicious piecing and patching I should be able to cover such a frame. So I promptly set to work and constructed a row of benches upon which I could bend and shape the frame of my craft.

Next I cut down a number of tall, slender young spruce, selecting, as I soon learned how to do, those that were straight-grained. These I trimmed, hewed, and planed; and then, bending them into shape, made them fast. Day after day I worked away until keelson, gunwales, bilge keels,

and ribs were all in place. This done, I was much pleased with the outlines; for, although I had not built boats, I had travelled in them enough to know that mine was shaped to ride the rough water it was likely to encounter.

When the frame of the boat was completed, it contained over forty pieces of timber, each from eight to twenty-five feet long, every one of which I had planed on top of a log, by walking alongside, back and forth, on my knees, since the log was too low to admit of my standing while using the plane. Next, I cut down two large trees, from which I peeled the bark in great strips twenty-five feet long, as I had learned to do by watching the Indians. With this bark I now covered the frame, fitting it down smoothly, with the sap side next to the canvas to give it a smooth support and prevent it from sagging between the ribs. Then I darned the holes in my canvas, sewed it together, and stretched and fastened it over the bark. The neighboring woods afforded me a large quantity of spruce gum, which I mixed with the fat from bacon, heating the two together until they blended. A rag, wound



THE FRAMEWORK OF MR. STONE'S BOAT.



THE BOAT FINISHED AND LOADED READY FOR ITS TRIP DOWN THE RIVER.

around the end of a stick, served as a swab with which I spread the hot pitch over the canvas until it was completely covered. I worked out some oars, and my boat was complete.

While I was still hard at work on my boat two heavy falls of snow almost buried my camp. Soon, however, the snow disappeared; and one beautiful Sunday morning, while still in my blankets, a robin near camp roused me with his bright, familiar song. I sprang up and dressed as quickly as I could, fearing that the little fellow would fly away before I could get a sight of him, but he continued to cheer me with his sweet notes all the morning.

While thus occupied, I observed very regular habits. I rose at five, breakfasted at six, and before going to work on my boat, prepared the skins of whatever small rodents my traps had captured during the night. I lunched at twelve, and, after a six o'clock dinner, took a run with Zilla, for our mutual good, which he seemed to enjoy quite as much as I. At one time I was threatened with pneumonia for nearly a week, but I tried to work on as though perfectly well, convinced that if I allowed myself to give way I should be seriously ill. At all times I used the greatest precautions while chopping, for the reason that, with my life depending entirely upon my own exertions, I could not afford to cripple myself.

My nights were somewhat restless. The awful strain of the long solitude was harder to bear than the dangerous presence of the Indians, and sometimes I wished for their return. In spite of my hard work I ate very little. I could not obtain much variety of food; and to cook the same thing over and over again, and eat it all alone, became very tedious. My isolation would have seemed less oppressive if I could have seen any prospect of a companion, but my anticipation of a lonely and difficult trip down the great unknown river,* in my untested, improvised, canvas boat, depressed my spirit. I had frequently heard the effects upon the mind of such loneliness

discussed, and many a tragic story came back to sadden me. Although I kept as busy as I could, and made a companion of Zilla, talking with him and running with him on the beach, my sensations during those solitary weeks were indescribable. I regard this period as the most trying ordeal of my life. In that one month of April I lived a lifetime.

On the fifth day of May, while at work, I heard a peculiar long-drawn swishing noise in the direction of the river, and, running to the bank, saw a tongue-like strip of water boring its way through the ice down the middle of the stream. Some distance below it stopped for a time, then began again. Sounds as though the mountains were tumbling down came from upstream. With mingled fear and joy I realized that the river ice was breaking, and that soon I should be released from the awful prison where I had been held for over thirty days. Was I freed only to find a watery grave in this mad, unknown river? The crushing, breaking ice roared louder and louder, until in front of me the ice of the whole river suddenly lifted and broke into huge, floating masses which began to move down stream. Then a great swell from above piled ice upon ice many feet high. So deafening was the battering of millions of tons of monster ice cakes that I could hardly control my nerves or my thoughts. For the three days during which this awful grinding continued, I obtained very little sleep. Then the ice began to move down stream, and at the end of five days most of it had disappeared, and I decided to launch my boat.

I crawled under it, knocked away the frame, and, lifting it from beneath with my shoulders, managed to work it forward inch by inch over the edge of the bank to the sand beach below. Once there, I found difficulty in extricating myself. If I lifted up one side, I could not get my body half-way out without finding myself held fast in such a position that I could not hold up the boat, which, with its heavy spruce bark, canvas, and pitch, probably weighed five hundred pounds. Luckily I

* The Mackenzie.

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THE COMING OF SPRING IN THE FAR NORTH.

I heard a peculiar long-drawn swishing noise in the direction of the river, and, running to the bank, saw a tongue-like strip of water forcing its way through the ice down the middle of the stream."

remembered seeing dogs scratch their way under fences, and in like manner I scratched my way out.

Once launched, my boat proved its capability to float a ton of cargo; and steering a difficult course among snags and rapids and fields of heavy ice, I made my way, with considerable difficulty, one hundred and fifty miles down stream to Fort Liard, a Hudson Bay trading post, where assistance for further navigation was procurable.

Once launched, my boat made its way with excessive difficulty. The river was very swift, and was shut in most of the time between high walls. I struck one rapid with a heavy swell a half mile long; and just as I did so I observed two enormous cakes of ice on either side, both of which seemed about to roll in on top of me and crush the boat each time we passed over the crest of a high wave. However, I took my oar and managed to ward them off, my boat turning sideways the while and tipping dangerously.

Farther down, the current had swept so strong against a high bank that this had been undermined, leaving the roots and ends of broken trees protruding from the water. Several times I just brushed them, but escaped without damage. Then, for many miles, the river spread out over a low, flat country.

It was nearly six o'clock before I saw a convenient place to land. I made for this, and, anchoring the boat, prepared my camp for the night. I had eaten nothing since five in the morning, and had been

constantly exerting my strength, but I had no desire for food.

The next morning I was up early and well started down stream again by 5.40. The river, here, was everywhere separated into small streams by many islands, but was still very rapid. How I ever escaped getting caught irrevocably in a tangle of drift, has ever since been a perfect wonder to me. Then, again, side winds kept me busy fighting off shore, and from the time I broke camp until twelve o'clock I pulled at the oars without stopping.

About that time I saw an Indian settlement a mile ahead of me, on the opposite side of the river, and was so anxious to see a human being that I made up my mind to land. So I bent to my oars and crossed to the farther bank, where I was met by a motley crowd which I at once recognized as friendly. I was invited up by one of the Indians, to his cabin, and there was as royally feasted as I have ever been in my life. My host, who could speak a little English, told me that he and his boy would take me to Fort Liard the following morning. When I was ready to start several women had brought me moccasins as gifts, and all the settlement was at the boat to bid me good-by. The morning was perfect, the waters of the great river everywhere calm and mirror-like.

Thus, after having steered a difficult course among snags and rapids and fields of heavy ice, and having undergone much fatigue and danger, I was not sorry when, a little after noon, we reached Fort Liard, and I was welcomed once again by white men.



A GROUP OF RENEGADE INDIANS FROM THE LIARD REGION.

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